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ABSTRACT

This handbook is intended to help school board members promote and guide the planning process in education. The guide is directed toward long-range, comprehensive planning that involves setting goals, considering alternatives, setting objectives and strategies for accomplishing the goals, identifying and acquiring needed resources, and evaluating the system to determine the extent to which goals are accomplished. Topics considered in the document include the scope of the planning process, who should be involved in planning, the organization required for planning, the planning process, evaluation and accountability, recordkeeping, communication, and errors planners should avoid. The appendix suggests ways to outfit a planning room to facilitate good planning. (Author/DN)

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PLANNING HANDBOOK

A practical guide to long-range organizational planning

for school boards and administrators

Produced by

The New York State Council of School District Administrators

and

The New York State School Boards Association, Inc.

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An officer of the New York State School Boards Association once said, "Why is it necessary to tell school boards and administrators that they should plan? They all know this and most of them do it."

There may be a germ of truth in the above statement, but, except for an occasional project such as a new building program, most boards of education do not consistently and systematically do real, long-range, comprehensive planning which involves organized goal setting, consideration of alternatives, setting objectives and strategies for accomplishing the goals, identifying and acquiring needed resources, and an evaluation system to determine the extent to which goals are accomplished.

Lacking these elements, and a system of record keeping which makes accurate comparison of results possible, responsibility cannot be fixed and any accountability in a real sense is impossible.

Long-range planning — and by that we mean plans developed up to a five-year period and updated at least annually — cannot be done in short board meetings once or twice a month which are usually cluttered with other agenda items. Nor should it be left as the sole responsibility of the chief school administrator; although his role in it is a vital one. The board of education must be committed to planning in both policy and practice if it is to give direction and support to its professional staff and account fully and properly to the public it represents.

The traditional pattern of school operation and improvement has been to do things better. An alternative approach is, through systematic planning, to do better things. This means deciding first what the schools under the board's jurisdiction ought to be doing and then deciding how best to do them, eliminating or modifying current programs that do not contribute to the goals or that are no longer economical or effective.

Long-range planning gets high priority when boards discover how much better they do when they plan. Good planning enables boards to render better accounting of their stewardship and achieve better education for their children with greater economy.

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Viewed superficially this may appear to be a silly question - superficial at least. But is it?

How many school boards (and administrators) go on day after day and year reacting to crisis after crisis as they arise? How many have avoided these crises through looking ahead, through anticipation and planning?

How often do school boards find themselves confronted with serious problems of which they had no conscious foreknowledge, but which had actually been building up unnoticed while they and their chief school administrator worked with details of paying bills, listening to minor complaints and dealing with routine day to day problems?

How much of the chief school administrator's - and the school board's time - is spent with details which properly should be handled by subordinates, when their time and his could much more profitably be spent looking ahead and establishing policy which would provide for the efficient handling of these matters?

A school board which would control the future rather than just let it happen; which would prefer to act rather than react; which would avoid surprises and anticipate problems; which would avoid fussing with details and would prefer to push ahead constructively toward the accomplishment of pre-established worthwhile educational and economic goals — that school board will plan, and plan well.

The intent of this handbook is that it be a practical instrument, directed primarily to board members; a "How-To-Do" document which will be a useful tool in promoting and guiding the planning process, which, when used properly, may help restore and maintain public confidence in education.

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SECTION 2 - SCOPE OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

No program to be carried out in a school system is either too large or too small for planning. The planning process or procedure (explained in Section 5 of this document) can be adapted effectively to anything from a long-range building program to a half-day inservice training workshop, to the development of the Board's own agenda. The key factor in deciding when to plan is not the scale of the project or the time-span involved, but rather whether the particular activity is worth taking time to think about systematically beforehand in order to be sure that what you want to happen as a result of the activity really does happen.

In this sense much so-called planning is not planning at all. Good planning makes provision for goals or objectives; strategies for accomplishing these objectives; programs and tasks laid out and assigned to particular people with a time set when they should be done; and a thorough evaluation of the results which alone makes accountability possible.

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SECTION 3 - INVOLVEMENT

A basic principle of good management is that those who are to be affected by decisions should be involved, insofar as is practical and possible, in making them. There are several reasons for this.

It creates a feeling of ownership and support.

A group of citizens from the community who have been consulted and involved in planning a school project of any kind, whether it be re-districting, school building programs or school budgets, know, understand, and feel that the finished product is, at least in part, theirs. They are far more likely to support the proposal at the polls and use their knowledge and influence to gain the support of others.

Likewise, a group of students who have actively participated with their teachers, administrators, and parents in planning an "open" school, independent study, mini-courses, or any other school program, inevitably feel ownership in it, and involvement leads to a desire to make it work.

Wider involvement provides more input of information and ideas.

For example, - Teachers are the professional educators who will do most of the work in a curriculum revision project. However, they can profit from sessions with students and parents who are vitally concerned with what is to be taught and learned.

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This principle holds true for all the population. Hence, the emphasis on widespread community involvement in recent years.

Programs grow from ideas. Ideas come from people. Hence the planning of any project is most likely to start with one person, or with a small group of people, such as a school administrator or a school board. However, one should never lose sight of the fact that:

1. Good ideas can come from anywhere and should be encouraged whatever their source.

2. Involvement in planning breeds support, while superimposed plans are often met with lethargy or opposition.

3. The involvement of those affected should come as early in the process as possible.

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SECTION 4 - ORGANIZATION FOR PLANNING — GETTING STARTED

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There are many ways in which a school board can get started on planning. It is often suggested that a district that has not had experience with systematic planning start with something in which there is a lot of interest and where successful results can be seen in a relatively short time — say six months to a year. This might be the planning of new programs in health education, or working on a way to increase the contributions of school volunteers. The key point is that the board decide what it wants to see happen — the goal — and that it devote enough time to follow through until the plan is developed and the goal is reached. It is usually helpful to get outside assistance when starting systematic planning (see Section 10).

While planning can get started on a single limited topic, a school board that wants to take a more comprehensive approach might consider steps like these:

The school which aims for a systematic planning approach to the solution of its many problems must organize itself for planning.

The school board should develop a clear, definite, written policy statement committing itself and the school system to a planning approach.

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The chief school administrator who works so closely with the board and is, in fact, the executive responsible for the carrying out of board policy, should be a party to this commitment. Unless the leadership is thoroughly committed, whatever planning is done will be sketchy, haphazard and unlikely to be implemented.

Lines of authority and cooperation should be clearly established. Task forces and/or committees should know specifically what their assignments are and to whom they are responsible. When a committee has completed the function for which it was set up, it should be terminated.

In the representative form of government, under which we operate, the school board is the final authority which approves and/or disapproves recommendations and authorizes action. Various committees set up for special segments of planning are advisory to the school board. They are not ultimately responsible for implementation. This should be clearly understood and lines of communication must be established.

The school board decided to embark on a district-wide planning program.

They drew up a planning policy and committed themselves to it.

They designated the chief school administrator as the chief contact man. His role in the whole process is a very important one. He works with the board in all matters and deals with the committees on a day-to-day basis as the representative of the board.

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After some necessary pre-planning, the board invited a small group to serve as a planning advisory committee.

With the assistance of a professional consultant from a Regional Planning Center, this planning advisory committee enlarged its own membership and set up an organizational chart.

As objectives were developed in planning sessions, the planning advisory committee set up special sub-committees or task forces to develop strategies for their achievement.

The coordinating committee met frequently with task force leaders. They clarified, screened and coordinated recommendations, and passed them along to the chief school administrator and the school board for implementation. Their function as a steering committee is very important.

Organization for Smaller Planning Projects

Where the project being planned is not district-wide in scope, such an elaborate organization is not necessary. However, the basic fundamentals such as involvement, record keeping, and a systems approach such as described in Section 5 of this handbook, are essential. Whether the problem be a noon hour program, a conservation class field trip, or whatever, the planning of it should involve all of those affected — pupils, parents, teachers, and administrators.

The reason for the proposal should be clear to all; objectives to be accomplished should be stated in written form; various strategies for achieving the objectives should be considered; tasks to be done should be assigned; dates for their completion should be set and a plan for evaluating the project should be developed.

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Sequencing of Meetings is Important

Committee meetings which are expected to result in plans requiring school board approval for implementation, should be held far enough in advance of the board meeting to permit the items to be included in the board agenda. Otherwise, long delays may result in getting necessary approvals. The more deeply the district is involved in planning, the more important this becomes. But, it is often ignored.

A Place to Plan

A favorable physical environment is essential for planning. Refer to Appendix "Conference or Planning Room Information."

A Time for Planning

Systematic planning pays off, but it takes time. While various phases of planning will be going on continuously within the school system, the school board should provide time specifically for its own planning.

With their chief school administrator and whatever consultant assistance they need, they should isolate themselves for at least two days per year of formal planning. This session should be free from interruptions and other distractions. Some can arrange this on their own school premises. Others prefer to gather at some outside planning center. Much can be accomplished in forty-eight hours of solid planning interrupted only by meals and sleep.

In addition to a long planning session as described above, one meeting a month should be spent in reviewing their plans, checking and evaluating accomplishments and hearing reports. This will assure that plans be carried out and that the members keep current on what is going on in their school system.

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SECTION 5 - HOW TO PLAN - THE PLANNING PROCESS

A process is a way of doing something. There are a number of planning processes ranging from simple brainstorming to highly technical systematic procedures involving complex analyses, computers, and sophisticated mathematics. There is no one best way to plan. Each organization needs to work out the planning approach that suits it. The main thing is to start simple, start slowly, and build from success to success. Although there are differing planning approaches there are certain elements that are common to most plans and planning processes.

Elements Common to Most Plans

1. WHAT?

   What is to be accomplished? What are the goals or objectives?

2. HOW?

   Strategies, procedures, activities to be used in attaining the objectives. Alternatives from which a choice is made.

3. WHO? and WHEN?

   Who will do what, and when will he do it? (Programs, tasks, assignments) Nothing happens until somebody does something.

4. WITH WHAT?

   What resources — people, facilities, materials, money — will be required?

5. EVALUATION

   How will the work be monitored to be sure it is on schedule and how will it be determined that the goal was achieved? Essential to the planning process. Must be built into the plan.

Common Steps in the Planning Process

1. Developing a written statement of purpose or goal. Why is the planning group gathered together? What is it expected to accomplish either by someone who convened the group or by the members themselves if they initiated the planning?

2. Determining what the current situation is with respect to the goal. Unless you know where you are, you can't tell how far you are from the goal. This step usually involves the gathering of considerable information.

3. Deciding what must be done to close the gap between the goal and the current situation. This involves determining what things might help and what hinder getting to the goal and then choosing the most appropriate strategies for getting help or removing hindrances.

4. Implementing the strategies. Assigning tasks, allocating resources, and setting deadlines.

5. Following up to see that work is done as intended and on schedule, and making adjustments as needed so that goal is attained.

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SECTION 6
EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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EVALUATION

1. Evaluation should be built into the planning structure. It consists of regular follow-up sessions at which time completion of tasks and accomplishment of the objectives are checked. It is an ongoing process through which feedback can be made, based upon evidence accumulated, and corrective measures can be taken.

2. In addition to the in-process evaluation described in 1. above, it is advisable in some instances, particularly where the planning project is an extensive one, to employ a skilled evaluator from outside the system. He or she can bring to the assessment a detached and impartial view.

   Such help can often be obtained, without cost, from the State Department of Education or the Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

ACCOUNTABILITY

1. Good planning supports accountability procedures because goals have been met, tasks clearly defined and assigned, and procedures are included to attempt to insure on-time accomplishment of the goals.

2. If the objectives are attained, and progress still falls short of what is desired, changes in the plans are called for. By consistent monitoring and checking, shortcomings will be recognized early and corrective action can be taken. Either the plan is wrong or it has not been followed correctly. In case of failure, the reasons can be spotted before time and money are wasted.

SECTION 7 - RECORD KEEPING

Minutes of the planning sessions as they are normally kept are not enough. They require too much reading and studying in order to determine what is planned and has been done or left undone. A record of decisions in outline form such as the sample on the following page usually proves more useful.

These sheets should be kept in a looseleaf notebook with which each member of the planning group should be provided. Additions and corrections can easily be added as changes and/or additions are made. One very key point to sustain a planning process is that the action record be agreed to at the end of each meeting -- particularly by those who have taken or received assignments. It is very important that people understand what is to be done and by when. One way to insure that all participants in a meeting have a common understanding of decisions reached is to record the decisions publicly on a chalkboard, or better still, on large sheets of paper (better because the sheets can be given to a typist and copies quickly given to all participants).

Just as important as making the record is checking it at the beginning of the next session. Were all the jobs to be done accomplished? If not, then, something needs to be done. This checking also insures that matters to be dealt with at a later time are not lost.

A simple action record format is as follows.

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SECTION 8 - COMMUNICATION

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Communication has always been, and remains, a serious problem in many schools. It affects not only the outside community's understanding of the school, but also is a problem within the school itself. One can say almost literally that "The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing". The planning effort must take note of and provide for this deficiency.

1. Progress reports of activities and achievements should be condensed, regularly published and widely circulated.

2. The public should be kept informed as to the goals and progress of plans being made. Face-to-face contact is good. Well informed speakers — board members, administrators and others involved in and knowledgeable about the school system's plans — should be available for meetings of all kinds: service clubs, granges, home bureau groups, coffee klatches, etc. Much information can be imparted in this manner, friends will be made for the school and support for school projects gained. Well prepared exhibits such as transparencies for overhead projectors and handouts are very useful in these meetings.

3. Public forums for discussion of school problems and projects should be held several times a year.

4. An atmosphere of "openness" and friendly cooperation should be maintained toward the press and other news media.

5. Dates and agenda of board meetings should be published as well as reports following the meetings. Many informative news write-ups will result from this.

6. An excellent school program is a school's own best advertisement. Pupils who carry home good reports about the school are the best propaganda a school can have. Pupils should be involved in the planning and kept informed.

7. School employees, both professional and nonprofessional, can make or break a school program. They are an important part of the school's public image and should be involved and informed. All too often they know only their own personal sphere of activity. Their views are then restricted and narrow. Their voice in the community, in such instances, can be negative and harmful.

SECTION 9 - SOME CAUTIONS TO PLANNERS

Some planning efforts are spoiled, or adversely affected, by mistakes which are made in the process. A few common errors are:

1. Sensationalism and Flamboyance

Some programs are started with a great deal of ballyhoo and advertising. The public should be informed, of course, but promising too much and using methods that are inappropriate often "turn people off" where school programs are concerned.

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2. Condemning what is, without offering constructive proposals for improvement

Planning efforts that are only aimed at tearing down existing arrangements are not likely to get or sustain much support. Analysis of current weaknesses is one starting point for planning, but should not be its sole purpose.

3. Secrecy

Schools belong to the public and that public has the right and the need to be informed. Restricting participation to a small group, meeting behind closed doors and failing to inform the citizenry of what is being planned, are sure ways to doom the planning effort to failure.

4. Moving too fast without a proper foundation

Leaders must lead, but they should not lose contact with their followers

5. Failure to analyze the current situation thoroughly

Essential to successful planning is a thorough examination and understanding of available resources; strengths and weaknesses of the organization; constraints; beliefs of the public involved; and a knowledge of the political, economic and social aspects of the community.

6. Failure to involve others at an early stage

Some pre-planning by a small group is necessary, but this planning should not be carried too far. If a group of interested and involved people is called together for the announced purpose of planning and are handed a complete plan with all the details worked out, they can only feel that they are meeting to rubber-stamp someone else's work. They will have no feeling of ownership and no particular incentive to make the plan work.

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SECTION 10 - GETTING HELP

Most groups that want to plan find it helpful to get outside help in getting started. Someone experienced with planning can help a group get started and help it to keep from getting bogged down along the way. Such people, sometimes called "facilitators" or "planning consultants" can describe alternative approaches to planning if that is desired. Or they can go right to work helping to plan and conduct the planning sessions. At first, the facilitator will probably play an active part in helping the group to conduct its business; but as the group gains experience in planning together, the outsider needs to intervene less and less and often becomes more of a resource for help in using more advanced planning tools.

Any board of education that has never worked with a skilled planner in the conduct of its regular business, would be well advised to consider starting with such help. By getting better planned and conducted meetings, the regular board business can be handled more expeditiously, thus creating the time to do the broader planning job that has been the focus of this handbook.

Such planning help is now available in New York State from many of the BOCES and the multi-BOCES Regional Planning Offices, from the State Education Department, from staff members of many colleges and universities, and from private consultants and consultant firms. If in doubt as to where to turn first for help, check with the District Superintendent or another school board that has begun to plan.

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APPENDIX

Physical arrangements can greatly facilitate good planning. The following are some suggestions for outfitting a planning room.

Walls for Display of Material

Lots of clear wall space for posting newsprint.

Chalk Boards

Ceiling to floor chalk boards are excellent. Cost can be cut by using regular blackboards or even portable black boards.

Furniture

Furniture should be movable so it can be easily arranged to accommodate one large group or several small groups in whatever configuration suits the work at hand.

Projectors

Overhead projectors and a large screen should be available. Most schools have these, but it is very convenient if they can be permanently available in the planning room.

The Room

Most planning groups will be small, but the room should be large enough to accommodate from thirty-five to fifty people. A group larger than this is not really a planning group but a meeting.

Space should be available for work in small groups when the entire planning session breaks up into sub-groups. Folding partitions can be used or sub-groups can use nearby classrooms for their special sessions.

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Good Ventilation

If planning sessions run for any length of time, the planning room must be able to be ventilated.

Coffee Making Facilities

While not essential, easy arrangements for coffee help improve the working environment.

Sundry Items

Easels, easel paper, magic markers, paper, pencils.

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